



# Nightmares

## What to do when you wake up

You may wake up in a state of panic when you wake from a nightmare, as the fight or flight you were experiencing in the dream is still in overdrive. Here are some strategies for reducing arousal and helping you return to sleep.

1. **Ground yourself:** Grounding is like a ship dropping anchor amidst a storm. It doesn't stop the storm, but helps the ship steady itself to weather the storm. When you have a nightmare, grounding means that you are able to help your body and mind remember they are in the present, in a safe place, and no longer in the dream—able to weather the nightmare storm until it passes.

### Grounding Exercise: “The Five Senses”

1. **Observe 2-3 things with your eyes.** Describe each object *in detail* to yourself. What are each objects' shapes, colors, & sizes?
  2. **Observe 2-3 things with your ears.** Describe each sound *in detail* to yourself. What are the sound qualities, pitches, volumes, & rhythms?
  3. **Observe 2-3 things you can touch.** Describe each sensation *in detail* to yourself. What are the sensations' textures, temperatures, & pressures?
  4. **Observe 1 thing you can smell.** Describe it *in detail* to yourself. Is it sweet, sour, strong, or weak?
  5. **Observe 1 thing you can taste.** Describe it *in detail* to yourself. Is it sweet, sour, savory, or bitter?
  6. **Take in the WHOLE space in with ALL of your senses.** Be very aware and observant of what it's like to be in your body in this safe, known space.
2. **Coping Statements:** Develop a few clear statements you can use to help your mind remember where it is, that you are no longer dreaming, and are now safe and secure.

Write out a statement ahead of time on a card, such as “I am \_\_\_\_\_, and I am at home in my bedroom in \_\_\_\_\_. I am in the year \_\_\_\_\_, and know I am safe and sound because of \_\_\_\_\_.”  
Read this statement to yourself repeatedly after grounding yourself.

3. **Stimulus Control:** Leave the bed if you aren't sleepy (eyes closing, yawning, head nodding, about to fall asleep) and do something out of bed that is relaxing. Make sure it's *not* just distracting (video games, cleaning, watching TV), but is something that truly calms your body and mind. Once you feel very sleepy again, then get back into bed (leave again if you don't fall asleep quickly though).